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My Angels of Genealogy

Lindie Lindstrom Banks*

When my father first arrived in Los Angeles, California, in 1931 at the age of forty, he was the first of the Lindstrom family from Rock Island, Illinois, to settle here. I was born a year later. The depression followed by World War II precluded travel back to his hometown, where my grandmother, uncles, aunts and cousins still lived, so I never met any of them until some of them joined the service and visited us on their way to duty in the Pacific or the European front. I was thrilled to meet them even though I was a shy, gangly ten year-old, but I never met my grandmoter who had been a widow since my father was two.

I enjoyed hearing my father's stories about his childhood in a Swedish American community, which he often told in a mock Swedish accent, but I was too young to take much interest in my Swedish heritage. Not until I retired from teaching high school English and became a grandmother myself did I begin seriously wondering about my ancestors. My father had told me that his father had died drunk falling from a streetcar in Moline, Illinois, in 1893, leaving a widow and four young sons. Their one daughter, Ruth, for whom I was named, had died at the age of six in 1889, two years before my father was born. I never knew my grandfather's Christian name, let alone what he had done with his short life, a few weeks short of 32 years, besides drink and procreate. He must have earned a living to support his family and he must have had some redeeming qualities in order to win the heart of the bright-eyed, statuesque Swedish *flicka* he married.

Although I never knew my grandmother, I have a photograph of her that must have been taken of her in her late fifties or early sixties. She stands in front of a lilac bush in a long taffeta skirt and a blouse with lace collar and cuffs. Since she took in sewing as well as boarders to support her four sons as a widow, I am sure she made the outfit she wears. Her white hair is drawn up in a braid and she wears rimless spectacles. Her head is at a jaunty angle and her smile is warm. After my husband died of cancer 19 years ago, when my three daughters were teenagers, I used to look at her picture in amazement. She had not only been widowed as a young woman of thirty, but two of her children had died by the time the picture was taken.

My parents had both died by the time I retired and had time to begin the genealogical research that would eventually lead me to Sweden. I don't remember who told me about the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center, located on

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the Augustana College campus in Rock Island, Illinois, but that is where I first wrote in the summer of 1989. My first inquiry yielded some copies of church records including the births and baptisms of my father and his three brothers and the funeral of my grandfather, whose name I learned for the first time: Erland Edvin Lindstrom.

In the meantime my two older daughters made me a grandmother for the first time within four months of each other. Two grandchildren later, I wrote the Swenson Center again in the fall of 1993. This time I asked for specific information about my grandparents. What had Erland Edvin done for a living? Did he have brothers and sisters? Who was the first in my father's family to emigrate from Sweden?

Once I made the decision to find out more than just vital statistics, I had the uncanny feeling that my ancestors wanted me to know about them. The first coincidence occurred when Jill Seaholm, a researcher who had just returned from a vacation, happened to see my letter together with the reply of her colleague at the Swenson Center. She recognized the name of Johan Peter Lindstrom, Erland's father, and called her mother, Marjorie Seaholm, to ask who in their family had that name. Her mother replied that it was her great-grandfather, Johan Peter who had emigrated with his father David Persson and their respective wives and children from the parish of Kölingared in Älvsborg *län* in Sweden in 1852. It turned out that Jill's mother and I were second cousins! She wrote me a letter warning me to sit down before I read it all and signed it "Jill Seaholm, researcher and second cousin once removed." She also made the offer to have her mother send me all the information that Jill's grandmother and her uncle had gleaned over several decades. Oh, this was more than I had dared hope for! I wrote back immediately and a few days later a manila envelope arrived from Marjorie Seaholm that showed my father's family back to the late 1700s.

By this time I had already signed up for an Elderhostel trip called "Scandinavian Seminar" to take place in the middle of June of 1994, but I thought, wouldn't it be great if Elderhostel offered a course near Rock Island so I could meet my cousins and see where my father grew up. When the next Elderhostel catalog came a few days later, there it was. It seemed I had a genealogical angel poised on my shoulder. On 5 June 1994, just two weeks before I was to leave for Scandinavia, there was an Elderhostel on the Augustana College campus in Rock Island, whose courses included one, "Coming to America: Swedish Emigration and Genealogy." I signed up the same day.

Because of the information that Jill and her mother had sent me, I came to

the Elderhostel in Rock Island well prepared. The first night I was there, Marjorie Seaholm picked me up and took me out to dinner. She had a tape of children singing in Swedish on the cassette player in her car. After dinner she took me to her home in Moline where I later met Jill and her father and watched a video cassette of their recent trip to Sweden that included views of the Kölingared area where our great-great-grandfather was born and raised. During the week I learned a great deal about the Swedish community in the Quad-cities area, which includes Davenport, Iowa, across the Mississippi River from Rock Island and Moline and East Moline, Illinois.

One of our off-campus tours with the Elderhostel was a trip to the Augustana Lutheran Church in Andover, Illinois, and the Jenny Lind Chapel, so named because the famous Swedish soprano agreed to donate \$1,500 at the request of the Swedish clergyman Lars Paul Esbjörn in 1851. It is a small, simple building without a steeple. The lumber that would have gone into the building of a steeple was used to make coffins for the victims of the cholera epidemic that swept the area at that time. The basement of the chapel, which had served as a makeshift hospital and morgue in those days, is now a museum looked after by Marjorie and her husband, Robert Seaholm, who grew up in Andover. In a glass case in that little museum is a stringed instrument made by our great-grandfather, Johan Peter Lindstrom, called a *psalmodikon*. It was used by congregations too poor to afford an organ. Johan Peter made and played the instrument when he led the singing at the weekly prayer meetings in his home in Paxton, Illinois, where the Lindstroms had settled before moving to Moline in 1882. Marjorie also showed me an article from *The Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly* that mentions Johan Peter Lindstrom had made spinning wheels for neighboring Swedish women. Now I had a sense of connection with my Swedish heritage that was concrete.

On the same trip I also met a first cousin for the first time. Lois Saunders and her husband Allan picked me up on a Sunday after the Elderhostel and took me to their church before driving me to the airport. I had known her brother Bill Lindstrom since he moved to Santa Monica with his bride just after World War II. He had told me that his sister had sung with the Sweet Adelines and was now an avid bell ringer. During the service as we sang a traditional Lutheran hymn, I blinked back tears as I thought of my heritage. My parents had become Christian Scientists early in their marriage. In that church there is no choir - just soloists. I remember asking my mother the reason for this since I had always longed to be a part of a choir. My grandmother, Emma Emilia, Erland's widow, had sung a solo in the first production of Handel's *Messiah* at Augustana College. Bill had told me that she had a little pump organ in her living room and remembered her playing it and encouraging everyone to sing at family gatherings. Both Marjorie Seaholm and

daughter Jill sing in the choir in their church. And I recall my father playing the piano and telling me about the Lindstrom Brothers' Band when he was a teenager. He said that the clergyman in the First Moline Lutheran Church would announce from the pulpit in a Swedish accent. -"God villing and the veather permitting, ve are going to have a picnic next Saturday and music by the Lindstrom brothers." Now I knew where my love of music came from.

Four days after I arrived home from Rock Island, Mike and I left for the Elderhostel in Scandinavia, which included a week on the Sogndal Fjord in Norway, a week at the Brandbjerg Folk High School near Jelling, Denmark, and a week at the Grimslov Folk High School in Sweden, which Vilhelm Moberg, the author of *The Emigrants*, had attended. Just 26 kilometers away is the city of Växjö, where the House of Emigrants is located.

When the Elderhostel ended, Mike and I rented a car and headed north to Ulricehamn, where Johan Peter's wife, Anna Christina Andersdotter Grönlund was born in 1825. We stopped to inquire about accommodations in the area. Claudia Berguson, our guide on the Elderhostel, spoke fluent Norwegian and some Danish and Swedish as well. We were giving her a lift to Göteborg, and she stepped up to the counter and explained in Swedish who I was and what I wanted. The gentleman said, with a twinkle in his eye, "I have just the place for you." He called the youth hostel in Kölingared called Årås and made reservations. Youth hostels, or *vandrarhem*, as they are called in Sweden, are only open for two hours, between five and seven in the evening. We drove Claudia to Göteborg, took a canal tour of the city, and headed back to Kölingared. My heart began to pound as I saw the signs. In the late afternoon we pulled up in front of the church where my great-grandfather had baptized his oldest son in 1849 - just three years before they left Sweden forever. The white steeple was startling against the intensely blue summer sky. The church was locked, but I was determined to return the next morning on Sunday. Small parish churches are not open every Sunday for services, but this weekend I was in luck. Less than two miles down the road was the *vandrarhem*, where we would be staying. Now the second uncanny coincidence was about to occur.

As I signed in, the young lady at the desk said that she knew a lady who knew all about the Lindstroms and where they had lived in the area. She asked me if I would like her to call for me. I felt almost faint as I nodded yes.

The next morning I was up at 5:00 A.M. perusing the material that I'd received from Jill and her mother. Then I took an early morning walk through the nearby woods hoping to spot a moose, and came back for breakfast in the charming mill house next to the *vandrarhem*. At exactly 9:00 A.M. Anna-Lena Hultman was

on hand with a notebook and introduced herself with a strong handshake. She is well-known as a genealogist with a great interest in the emigrants from the parishes in Älvsborg län. We sat down in the dining room where she began to explain how we might be related. She also had my great-grandfather's diary containing 60 pages, written in Swedish, together with the memoirs of his oldest son, Andrew Peter, who would later become a widely respected Lutheran clergyman in the Augustana Synod after studies at Augustana College. Anna-Lena spoke excellent English, so that I was able to take notes and record her voice on my micro-cassette recorder. I felt as I were in a dream! After an hour she suggested that we visit the Kölingared Church before the service began. She sat in the front seat of our tiny Renault "Elf," Mike drove and I sat in the back. Inside the church was the baptismal font, which looked centuries old.

Next Anna-Lena guided us to the soldier's cottage, where my great-great-grandfather, Per Kant, had lived with his wife, Maria Davidsdotter. They had one son, born in 1802, before Per Kant was sent off to Stralsund, Germany, as No. 680 in the Älvsborg Regiment to die in the Pomeranian War in 1805. Later that son, David Persson, would marry his first wife, Stina Isaksdotter. The couple had two children before she died at the age of 35. The oldest was my great-grandfather, Johan Peter, born in 1826. David remarried a year after his wife died. He and Maria Lisa Andersdotter would have three more children before he and his now grown and married son, Johan Peter, would emigrate together with their families. There were in all ten in the emigrant party. In excerpts from David Persson's diary he wrote: "They came to America Sept. 16 1852, had to wait about three months in Sweden before boat sailed, which took a great deal of money. Landed in New York after a voyage of 11 weeks by sailboat - a very dangerous and perilous passage travelled on to Chicago & lived in Ft. Dearborn after travelling from New York in a boxcar."

When they arrived in America they adopted the family name of Lindstrom, instead of the patronymic system used in Sweden at that time. David Persson goes on to describe how two of the daughters were left behind in New York, "owing to cholera raging in Illinois." The girls, who were eleven and thirteen, finally arrived in Chicago a year later. Due to a miscommunication in the mails, there was no one to meet them. A finely dressed gentleman offered to take them to their destination, but the older one became suspicious and refused. She had been in America long enough to know about white slavers in the area. A Methodist family took them in until they were reunited with their family in St. Charles. David wrote: "There was great rejoicing when the girls finally reached their home and parents after the long separation."

Later, Johan Peter's oldest son, Andrew Peter, would repeat many of his fa-

mily's struggles in his 16-page memoir. It is a close variation on the novels by Vilhelm Moberg, which I am reading again with new perspectives.

After visiting the tiny red soldier's cottage with the white trim, Anna-Lena directed us to the Bygget farm, where David and his first wife lived. The buildings are gone, but the farmer that owns the land has put up a post marking the spot where David and his first wife lived. We also visited the beautiful farm overlooking Lake Vallern where Johan Peter and his bride, Anna Christina, lived when they were first married. There are several cottages on the land which are a part of a bed and breakfast institution run by Mona Myre. We could have stayed in the one where Johan Peter and Anna Stina first lived as man and wife. Mona is a fine crafts-woman who holds a Christmas bazaar each year in the beautiful old barn where Johan Peter worked as a skilled carpenter. Close to the lake is the tiny wash house where Anna Stina boiled clothes and rinsed them in the lake. In the winter she would have had to crack the ice first. We also visited Gullskog farm where Johan Peter and his growing family moved, together with his father, who also had young children with his second wife. Shortly after that they decided to leave. Andrew Peter wrote: "My parents were extremely poor, and could scarcely, even with care and economy, get enough for our daily bread, although my father was a skilled cabinet-maker. Tired of this almost payless job (if work could be obtained), as well as a dark outlook for the future, my father and grandfather decided, together with their families, to emigrate to the much talked about America."

Our day and a half with Anna-Lena had been emotional for me. I had walked where my ancestors had worked and struggled, loved and married, had given birth and many had died. Two weeks after visiting the Dalarna area and the homes of two well-known Swedish artists, Anders Zorn and Carl Larsson, as well as Uppsala and Stockholm, we returned to Växjö where I spent a day searching the microfilmed records to learn about my grandmother Emma's family, which came from a parish near Jönköping not far from Ulricehamn.

My journey has really just begun, but the genealogical angels have given me an incredibly rich beginning. Knowing about one branch of my family makes me feel a part of an ongoing saga. I have a renewed interest in the history of my country and its people, the emigrants who came to find a better life.

Because of the Swenson Center and Elderhostel, I was able to go beyond just names and significant dates in church records. I know something about what my ancestors did, and I'm especially grateful to those of them who, despite the hard work their lives demanded took the time to write down some of their family history. And thanks to Anna-Lena Hultman who goes to great lengths to keep the stories of the Swedish emigrants alive. These are my genealogical angels.